

How Cross-Cultural Comparative Literature Method Involves Successful Use of Grammar Translation Techniques: With Special Reference to Bangladesh

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Abstract Nowadays GT is a widely criticized method in the field of teaching students EFL. Yet students from some culture prefer its teacher-centered activities especially vocabulary drills and the memorization of grammatical rules in a context that emphasizes less spoken interaction in the target language (TL). But speaking the target language is a very important skill. So we have intermingled some preferable GT techniques with interesting cultural activities that promote meaningful communication among English language learners. In this article, we have tried to explain how our method combines GT and CLT techniques in a lesson plan that engages students with activities that compare and contrast subject-matters and cultural features lying in the two. Since Bangladeshi students favour GT techniques and English being their target language, we have tried the device on them using Bangla literature (to teach EFL) and English literature (from a country where English is spoken). We have also tried to show how the device works on our students and what results follow).

Keywords GT, CLT, Cross-Cultural Comparative Literature, Method, Interactive classroom, Acquiring cultural insight, Language skills

1. Introduction

In the context of globalization and existing competitive aspects of the world, the importance of English stands supreme. In Bangladesh, English had the status of the official language till the end of the Pakistan rule. With the inception of the country in 1971, English lost its official second language status but it retained its importance as a highly useful academic language. It is now widely recognized as a means of access to higher education, scientific and technological development, as the language for commerce and industry, diplomacy, sports, advertising and so on. That's why English is given utmost importance as Bangla and is taught compulsorily from a very early stage of education in the schools and this teaching continues till the Degree (Graduation) level in Bangladesh. But unfortunately, there exists a wide gap between what our students are supposed to know and what they actually learn. There remain various reasons behind this language inefficiency. Lack of proper motivation, social, psychological and pedagogical factors--all are responsible for this. One of the most objectionable reasons about our teachers is that they do not follow the proper method or technique while teaching EFL

(English as a Foreign Language) to the students. Very much deplorable is that most of our students and teachers try to find out a 'short-cut' to reach their goal, which, in fact, is not proved much effective in the field of acquiring and sharing linguistic and communicative competence. Considering CLT (Communicative Language Teaching) to be more effective than GT (Grammar Translation), CLT is now a widely practiced method around the world. It has been in practice for last few years in Bangladesh also. But it is observed that for some reasons or others, teachers and learners have developed a liking for the GT method of language learning. Maybe for being habituated for long time, they find the GT an easy-going and more comfortable approach. Taking this into account, we have intermingled GT method with CLT and tried to design a process that ensures student-centered and interactive language learning, and which helps our students achieve benefits from both the approaches. From our experience, we have found that the Cross-Cultural Comparative Literature method can best be used in this regard, as it works better in creating a language-friendly environment both for students and teachers.

Nowadays GT is a widely criticized method in teaching advanced English as a foreign language, but students belonging to some cultures prefer its teacher centered activities like vocabulary drills and the memorization of certain grammatical rules in a setting that puts less emphasis on spoken interaction in the language being learned (the Target Language). However, since speaking the target

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language is a very important skill, we have examined a device incorporating some GT techniques with pre-planned and interesting cultural activities. We have found that these tasks inspire meaningful communication among English language learners. This combination of GT with CLT works well as tedious way of studying grammar and vocabulary is avoided here and GT techniques are related with relevant and engaging cultural activities that facilitate students to communicate ideas and apply their critical thinking skills outside the classroom. In teaching EFL to the Bangladeshi students this concept has been proved effective to a great extent.

2. The GT and CLT Methods

Prior to the 18th century, the translation of literary texts was the main method for studying foreign language. The classical method, as it was originally called, underwent a name change in the mid-1800s and was thereafter known as Grammar Translation (GT) method. GT was criticized because it was unconcerned with students' oral communication skills (**Sapargul and V. Sartor, 2010**). As a result in the late 1900s the tedious GT method lost popularity in the United States (**Savington, 1991**) and other EFL/ESL countries. Simply learning how to translate and recite rules was not sufficient for learners who recognized the importance for oral communication in the target language.

GT being teacher-centered had limited interaction and spontaneous creative activities. Teachers used GT to focus students' attention on grammar and vocabulary by having them read and translate target language texts; it was assumed that this process would allow students to gain an understanding of the grammar of their own native language (**Larsen-Freeman 2000**). Examining grammatical structures and deducing rules was considered an excellent mental exercise that would help students grow intellectually by broadening their language, history, and literacy knowledge. However, the classical target language texts were written in non-standard language and presented as a linguistic exercise with no attempt to include themes, style, or culture into the lesson (**Sapargul and V. Sartor 2010**). Despite this, GT is still popular and attractive in some countries, and is considered a good method for translators and for those who are not very much concerned with knowing how to speak or pronounce (i.e., the manner and pronunciation of) the target language.

In Bangladesh also, GT method is still being used in modified forms, side by side with the CLT. For our having been stuck with the GT method for about 150 years, it is still appealing to our teachers and students. This attachment has a good impact in learning the target language centering round the Cross-Cultural Comparative Literature method. The CLT approach arose in response to criticism of methods that have been unable to prepare learners to communicate effectively or to learn the language thoroughly. A good number of methods appeared during 1960s and 1970s which one way or

other tried to bring perfection in communication and improve the teaching of language. Finally a single communicative approach emerged in 1980s (**Nunan, 1991**).

Today CLT represents a wide variety of student centered methods that prepare learners to interact with authentic language in real life situations and setting, where they acquire true communicative competence. Through these they attain mastery of grammar, language style, discourse and verbal and non-verbal strategies. Vocabulary and grammar are generally not drilled and memorized, but are instead acquired through communicative interactions and tasks that are meaningful and relevant to the English learners (**Sapargul and V. Sartor, 2010**). Moreover, because of its stress on perfection, CLT prepares students for the linguistic challenges they encounter outside the classroom. (**Savington 1991**). Today group-work, pair-work, role-play, different task-based projects and other communicative classroom activities are widely practiced by teachers and administrators who use CLT.

3. Difficulties with Communicative Language Teaching

It has been found that, for various reasons, CLT methods are sometimes difficult to apply in certain areas outside the western world. (**Ellis 1996; Leung 2005; Savington, 1991**). For example, many Asian students and non-native EFL instructors actually prefer GT method because it fits their cultural mores (**Amengual-Pizarro, 2007**). According to **Savington and Wang (2003)**, Taiwanese students are resistant to CLT and prefer GT methods; because CLT negatively affects the students' attitudes, influences successful language learning, which depends on a positive attitude.

The authors handle the students having similar attitudes in Bangladesh where many of the students lack confidence in speaking English and communicating spontaneously. But interestingly enough, they do want speaking practice. This experience has led the authors to the idea of incorporating some GT techniques into the CLT curriculum; with a view to encouraging the students to practice their oral skills in an easy-going and interesting process and motivating them to acquire positive attitude.

4. Teaching Cross-cultural Literature in Classrooms

Even though some GT techniques may be popular, EFL teaching methods require something more than the presentation of grammar and vocabulary lessons; they must also create multicultural awareness and critical thinking skills that students need to become fluent and successful English speakers who can handle advanced communicative activities (**Sapargul and V. Sartor 2010**).

It is recognized that literature is a means for improved critical thinking skills. As **Van (2009)** observes, literary texts

are effective in promoting English language development in all four skills through interaction, collaboration, peer teaching, and independent individual student activities. Some other scholars have also given the evidence of effectiveness of using novels as teaching materials in the EFL or ESL classrooms (**Yahya and Rahim, 2009**).

5. Why and How the Cross-Cultural Comparative Literature is Used

Language is an inseparable part of a Culture and since language is used by social beings, it is obviously influenced by the culture of the language. Regarding the culture of a language, Professor Dr. Serajul Islam Chowdhury, a noted Bangladeshi scholar of English literature, observes, "Language is not a telephone connection or a computer set, it carries with it its own history and sociology, its own individual culture (**Chowdhury, 2001**)". In fact, any language is a kind of code shared by a community of people. The code come in the form of meaningful sound clusters or group of words. It is also true that no word has any independent meaning beyond the context in which it is used. But words are rooted in the culture to which they belong. They have their own inheritance, goes on changing. So, without being conscious of the culture of the target language, students cannot communicate in that language (**Islam, S. and S.I. Chowdhury, 2005**).

Taking these ideas into account, the authors have tried to implement the concept of the Cross-Cultural Literature method by comparing similar genres and themes in poems, stories and novels in Bangla (Mother Tongue) and English (TL) language. We often found striking similarities and differences, such as in the way a hero is depicted, a story is told or an imagery is used. We have observed that these comparison could be used to teach our students much more than English, as making comparison between two texts is not solely the function of the method, rather, it explores worldviews using information and knowledge of literary structures that appeal to and create stimulus into our students.

6. Some Guidelines for Using this Method

1. Literature requires advanced linguistic and cognitive skills. Hence, the Cross-Cultural Comparative Literature Method is best-suited for the students of high school, intermediate and advanced levels.
2. In this method, two texts with similar features are chosen to be examined by the students; one text is taken from the host country where EFL/ESL is being taught and the other from an English speaking country. To complete the activities, teachers must

find English translation of the host country literary texts, and this may be difficult. For instance, in our case, since few English translations of Bangla literature currently exist, it was necessary for us to translate the Bangla texts in advance. We have also decided to write some new Bangla stories (and poems) to add to the choice of available reading materials.

3. For the purposes of interest, relevance, understanding and language level, choosing the correct text is very important. As in our case, we started with short poems and later tried short stories and we have plans for using other genres of literature in the same way.
4. This method can be used to any English teaching situation where it is possible to analyze cross-cultural differences, such as music, religion, politics, economy, social taboos, community behavior and so on. English being the target language in Bangladesh, we are to choose subjects from English dominant countries and put them to compare with related issues in our perspective.
5. In this method, co-teaching by a native speaker of each language can bring optimum outcomes. If it is not possible, professionals with academic excellence having vast acquaintance with English native setting can also be employed. This will help make the cultural concepts appeared in the literature of each country easily understandable to the learners.
6. This method is time consuming for the students to achieve sufficient familiarity with the literary texts. So, teachers are suggested to manage the class-time thoughtfully and adjust the activities accordingly. It is also suggested that students' talking time (STT) must be more than the teachers' talking time (TTT) and things must be got done through students' activities, while teachers will play the role of facilitators and guides only.

As for Bangladesh, a class-room situation is just the reverse as has been told. In a classroom here a teacher enters, starts delivering lecture on a given topic and continues it till the class-ending bell rings. Students keep sitting silently and workless who are not active agents, but passive recipients, as if listening to a dramatic monologue uttered by the teacher, the one and the only performer in the class room. The students have got practically nothing to do other than listening to (in some cases just hearing) what the teacher says, no matter whether they make out the lecture points clear or not. Although the teacher is teaching communicative English, hardly does any interaction or communication take place here between the teacher and students or between the students. Seldom does the teacher allow the learners to pose questions to him/her (**Bahattacharjee, 2009**). The comparative literature method does not work at all in such a one-way classroom environment.

7. Applying the Cross-Cultural Comparative Literature Method with Poetry

In order to activate our plans, we, the Principal teacher and the Co-teachers (working alternately), chose an English translation of a famous Bangla poem 'Vidrohi', written by Kazi Nazrul Islam, the national poet (also known as the 'Rebel Poet') of Bangladesh and a noted poem 'Song of Myself' by the American poet Walt Whitman. Both poets are nationally admired in their respective countries, similar in temperaments and deal with similar subject-matters in their poems. For running the poetry class, we prepared a lesson-plan (as suggested by **Sapargul and V. Sartor, 2010**) intermingling techniques from both GT and CLT methods to work together for facilitating students speaking English. The Lesson Plan was as follows:

Step 1: Before Reading:

- i) Print out vocabulary lists and highlight the significant grammar points in the two poems.
- ii) Check students' knowledge of English by making them identify grammatical structures and explain vocabulary.
- iii) Get students generate sentences using the poems' grammar and vocabulary to ensure comprehension and build background knowledge.

Step : 2: While Reading:

Students give a close (silent) reading of both the poems.

Step 3: After Reading:

- i) The teachers conduct a class discussion about elements of both poems, including theme, rhyme, style, symbolism, metaphor and imagery, etc.
- ii) Supply students with a handout containing the following questions from easy to thought-provoking:
 - Compare the word count of the two poems.
 - Compare the parts of speech
 - Does one poem use more verbs?
 - Does one poem use more adverbs?
 - Does either poem rhyme?
 - Do the poems have similar grammatical features? If different, how?
 - Which poem seems more appealing to you?
 - Can you identify a metaphor?
 - Can you identify a symbol?
 - Is this symbol the same for both cultures?
 - Can you identify an imagery?
 - Can you sort out some words that seem very attractive or significant to you?
- iii) Students form pairs and work together to find out answers to the questions.
- iv) The pairs try to translate some lines of the English poem into their mother tongue (in our case, Bangla).
- v) The student pairs take turns presenting their

translations to the class. Teachers ask them questions like: Why did you choose this word? Can this be said easily in your language? Can you translate this symbol literally into your language?

- vi) The whole class chooses the best translations from among all those presented.

Step 4: Preparing a Presentation:

- i) Divide the class into several groups, depending on the size of the class. (In our case, the class consisted of 30 to 35 students, and we divided the class into 5 groups)
- ii) Student groups use their knowledge of the two poems to prepare a presentation about their analysis of each text (as done following step 3).
- iii) Each group has some time to meet in a separate room or other suitable place. Arrangements for tea or light refreshment may help students relax.
- iv) Each group works in English and discusses the poems' themes, symbols, adjectives, or some other elements.
- v) Each group chooses a single topic and writes their ideas with colored markers on poster papers.

Step 5: Presentation of Results:

Students present results by turns. For example, in our class, the first group wrote adjectives from the poems that described 'freedom' on the poster paper, each group member chose an adjective, synonyms were displayed with examples in sentences. The second group spoke about symbols they had pointed out, the third about adverbs, the fourth about imagery and the fifth about attractive words or diction. All the groups presented posters displaying their respective assignments.

Steps: 6: Pairs Filling Out Comparison Chart:

- i) After the presentation each student from group 1 pairs up with a student from group 2, and from all groups such pairs are formed.
- ii) The new pairs work together to fill in a chart of the two poems side by side, listing and answering the questions presented in step 3.
- iii) Student pairs survey each other about the following questions:
 - Which poem had difficult vocabulary?
 - What did you notice about the word order in each poem?
 - What symbols are there in each poem?
 - What metaphors are there in each poem?
 - Which words seem most attractive and interesting in each poem?
 - Which poem did you like the best? Why?
 - Will you read other poems by the same poet?
 - Do you read poetry often? Why or why not?
 - What objects are best for poetry?
 - Can you cite any work by Nazrul or Tagore, which is recited and sung simultaneously?

Step 7: Discussion Involving the Whole Class:

To sum up, the co-teachers run an open discussion about the thematic unity or likeness and the cultural environment in the two poems. This can lead to interesting discussion. In our case, for example, when one student opined that poets are more emotional rather than practical, we discussed about the difference and significance between prosaic and poetic diction and when and how emotions work in a man. We also asked the students if poems are necessary for life or not. Answers of varied interests began to come and a very lively discussion followed.

Step 8: Homework:

- i) For homework, we assigned our students to work together in groups of five to conduct research on one of the following topics:
 - What subjects do poets write about?
 - How does emotion work in a poem?
 - Are poets only entertainers? Don't they hold any high ideals?
 - Are poets unrealistic or impractical people?
 - When poetry is sung, can it be still termed 'poetry'?
 - How does poetry differ in styles and formations?
- ii) The small group presented their findings in five-six minute tasks during the next class.

Thus, we found the poetry class worked fairly well. We would like to mention here that the poetry class was the first phase of our endeavor with the interesting Cross-Cultural Comparative Literature method and we worked with the students who had completed their higher secondary level (12th grade) and got admitted into a university in pursuit of higher education. We also tried short stories, essays and parts of novels by turns following the Cross-Cultural Comparative Literature method and the responses were imperative.

8. Additional Activities

There are so many options to introduce literature into the classroom and involve students in active communicative activities. Many of these activities fairly involve the useful reinforcement of grammar and vocabulary for the students. These activities can be expanded to a large order of CLT techniques, such as bridging the gap activities, role-plays, debates, or task-based projects dealing with the culturally dissimilar literary styles or traditions. Brain-storming, mind-map, word-puzzles, simulation, peer learning, think-pair-share, ordering scrambled sentences etc. are some of the devices that can be used interestingly in achieving the goals of the Cross-Cultural Comparative Literature method.

9. Findings

The Cross-Cultural Comparative Literature method has

had a surprising effect on our students, since it helped our students develop their knowledge and skills in English to a great extent. We tried the procedures on them for a period of six months and by this time, they have made satisfactory improvement in learning and using English which was, in fact, much more than what we had anticipated. These are the students who would often make errors in using tense, subject-verb agreement, determiners and modifiers, possessives, modals, plurals, pronouns, structure and so on. But strangely enough, after applying and exercising the method with determination, enthusiasm and confidence, we, both students and teachers, have found it very much effective and beneficial for us. Our learners have been able to remarkably overcome their drawbacks in English and their mentioned errors have declined almost to fifty percent. Now they are confident enough to shake off their shyness and confusion while speaking English, what they could not do six months ago. They have gained sufficient degree of expertise and self-confidence in other skills of English, too. Furthermore, they have been able to acquire important and interesting cultural insights. This success has made the concerned teachers as well as the students more sanguine of and encouraged for applying the method further in our language-learning classroom activities.

10. Conclusions

It is inspiring and interesting to work with cross-cultural differences. It motivates students to think critically when the EFL/ESL students question their assumptions and consider diverse points of view. This imparts tolerance and understanding among the students. They become considerate and liberal about people and culture of other countries, and at the same time, they become aware of their own cultural values and validating their own identities. Again discussing and understanding the cultural diversity helps students possess strong attitude against cultural imperialism and cultural intrusion. A comparative literature method is an excellent way and we can successfully use it in the classroom to focus on critical grammar and vocabulary and to introduce all four English language skills. What is most important is that the method has a great magical power to generate enthusiasm among students to participate in interactive activities. We find our teaching presentations more appealing and fruit-bearing when we apply the Cross-Cultural Comparative Literature method specially to enhance our students' speaking skills. This pedagogically diverse process makes our students feel excited and more attentive to the classroom activities. This excitement and attention result in a fascinating outcome. That's why the method can be used with confidence in the countries like Bangladesh where English is taught and practiced as a very important foreign language or where it is used as a second language and where GT is still appealing to the teachers and the students. It is hoped that proper application of the method will certainly bring amazing results.

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